

Premium Vintage Ports: Small but perfectly formed

Axel Probst compares a range of wines from a small, relatively new category of Vintage Port, which is produced in tiny quantities in special vintages from special parcels in the houses' best vineyards

There is little in the wine world that is as exclusive as Vintage Port from a fully declared year. "Three times per decade" was the magic rule, so fully declared Vintage Port has always been scarce. Even scarcer, due to being produced in even smaller quantities, are Premium Vintage Ports. Normally harvested from small parcels of old vines within the respective quinta, the microclimates of these plots yield even more special wines—so special, indeed, that some producers prefer not to blend them into their Vintage Ports but, rather, to bottle them separately. These Premium Vintage Ports are not bound to the years of general declaration and, in fact, quite often vary from them.

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Having owned estates for generations, the leading Port families and their viticulturists have long known their quintas' sweet spots and generally used these grapes to spice up the blend. In great years, these special parcels were always the backbone of the Vintage Port. Then, gradually, producers began to recognize the potential of bottling them separately in tiny quantities.

But why produce an even more special Port when the regular Vintage Port represents only some 2–5 percent of the harvest every two or three years? Answer: Because the market supports it, and the reputation of the Port house benefits from it tremendously. Especially given that it is not declared every year, Vintage Port is not expensive if you compare it to classic fine wines from other regions. Even the greatest vintages from the top producers rarely carry a three-digit price tag on release; most cost only half that, and production is rather measured in tens, rather than hundreds, of thousands of bottles. I am quite sure that more houses will soon join the "Premium Vintage Port Club."

Unfortunately, it is quite easy to confuse Premium Vintage Ports with single-quinta Vintage Ports. While Premium Vintage Ports are generally regarded as superior to regular Vintage Port, single-quinta Vintage Ports are normally bottled in years when the grape quality is very good but not exceptional. Some Premium Vintage labels (Taylor, Noval, and Croft, for example) look very much like the regular Vintage labels and have only a small distinguishing identification (Vinhas Velhas, Nacional, and Serikos respectively).

Opposite: The chapel at Quinta do Vesuvio, after which its magnificent Premium Vintage Port is named.

Photography courtesy of (top) Symington Family Estates



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Figure 1: Premium Vintage, Vintage, and Single-Quinta Vintage Ports

Producer/brand	Premium Vintage Port	Vintage Port	Single-Quinta Vintage Port
Quinta do Noval	Quinta do Noval Nacional	Quinta do Noval*	Quinta do Noval Sival**
Taylor	Taylor Quinta de Vargellas Vinhas Velhas	Taylor	Taylor Quinta de Vargellas
Quinta do Tedo	Quinta do Tedo SAVEDRA	Quinta do Tedo*	No second label
Niepoort	Niepoort PISCA/Bioma/Bioma Vinha da PISCA	Niepoort	Niepoort Secundum**
Quinta do Vesuvio	Capela de Quinta do Vesuvio	Quinta do Vesuvio*	No second label
Graham	Graham The Stone Terraces	Graham	Graham Quinta dos Malvedos
Ferreira	Ferreira Vintage Port Vinhas Velhas	Ferreira	Ferreira Quinta do Porto
Croft	Croft Quinta da Roêda SÉRIKOS	Croft	Croft Quinta da Roêda

* by definition single-quinta Vintage Port
** second label



NOTES

Quinta do Noval Nacional: The original

First on the scene, and still *primus inter pares*, is Quinta do Noval with its legendary Vintage Port, Nacional. From less than 2ha (5 acres) of vines, the most expensive Vintage Port very often does not follow the rules of the general declaration. “We bottle Nacional only when it sings,” says Noval’s managing director Christian Seely. Approximately 6,000 ungrafted vines produce a very small number of bottles (3,000 in the 2017 vintage), and whenever a new Nacional is released to the market, it almost immediately sells out. The first Noval Nacional was bottled in 1931, and this is probably the rarest and most expensive bottle of Vintage Port in the world. Other years of production are 1934, 1945, 1947, 1950, 1955, 1958, 1960, 1962, 1963, 1964, 1966, 1967, 1970, 1975, 1978, 1980, 1982, 1983, 1985, 1987, 1991, 1994, 1996 (LR), 1997, 1998 (LR), 1999 (LR), 2000, 2001 (LR), 2003, 2004 (LR), 2011, 2016, and 2017. (LR = Late Releases.) There are also vintages for which Nacional was bottled but not officially released, such as 1968 and 1986.

Quinta do Noval Nacional 2011

Intense violet reflections in the almost pitch-dark color. Amazingly concentrated, with cassis, licorice, chocolate, and white pepper in the balanced bouquet. Intense structure, with perfectly supporting acidity and a fantastic length on the palate. Long and spectacular aftertaste. Child #2 of the legendary 1963. | 99

Quinta do Noval Nacional 1994

Extremely dark-red color. White pepper, red-berry fruit, and a mix of spices on the underlying expressive nose. The '94 has not fully woken up yet. Tannic palate, with white pepper, raspberry, plums, and milk chocolate. Long aftertaste, with a lot of finesse. Child #1 of the legendary 1963. | 98+

Quinta do Noval Nacional 1963

This is the Vintage Port that most people would like to take to their desert island. High scores from everyone, and so much life ahead that it almost frightens you. The color is easily 10 or 20 years younger than you would expect. Deep, dark red, with lots of reflections. Perfectly balanced bouquet, with finesse and intensity. Long and multilayered aftertaste. Port heaven! | 100

Taylor’s Quinta de Vargellas Vinhas Velhas: Next in line

Like Noval’s Nacional, Taylor’s Vargellas Vinhas Velhas does not strictly follow the general declaration years. Since its first year of production in 1995 (no general declaration but some great Ports nevertheless), vintages 1997, 2000, 2004, 2007, 2009, 2011, and 2017 followed. Most of the grapes are picked from four different very old plots at Vargellas with different altitudes. All of these four plots (Polverinho, Renova do Depósito, Renova do Armazém, and Gricha) are either north- or northwest-facing and produce fresh and concentrated Ports. Head enologist David Guimaraens states, “The remarkable characteristic of the Vinha Velha Vintage Ports is their multidimensional complexity and their distinctive and subtle personality. This derives from the rich diversity of grape varieties planted on these old terraces, many of which are traditional varieties not widely used today.”

Taylor’s Quinta de Vargellas Vinhas Velhas 2017

The first VVV since the 2011 vintage—hence the longest gap since 1995. Violet reflections in the pitch-dark color. Reductive spicy fruit, the nose shows that there are lots of layers underneath. Tobacco, cherry, dark chocolate, and redcurrant. Fantastic complexity on the palate, with white pepper, tobacco, lots of red-berry fruit, and cherry. Perfectly structured tannins and acidity. Long, multilayered aftertaste. The production is a little more than 5,000 bottles. | 96

Taylor’s Quinta de Vargellas Vinhas Velhas 2011

Also from a fantastic year, this VVV shows a deep, dark-red color. Same style on the bouquet, with a complex but balanced spicy fruit. Raspberry, chocolate, white pepper, tobacco, and cherry, with very nice integrated acidity. Long and astringent aftertaste. | 95

Taylor’s Quinta de Vargellas Vinhas Velhas 2007

If you taste this side by side with the regular Taylor’s Vintage Port from the same year, it immediately reveals it is the bigger brother: Floral, complex nose, with tobacco, cherry, and blackcurrant. Concentrated and intense on the palate. The bouquet is reductive in the beginning but develops very nicely with every minute aerating. After two hours: fantastic complexity, with cherry, chocolate, and licorice. Long aftertaste. For me, this is the Port of the vintage. | 94

Quinta do Tedo Savedra

As early as 2000, the Bouchard family decided to bottle the small Savedra plot by itself and not to blend it into the Vintage Port. Exposed almost full south and very close to the river, Savedra only produces Port as winemaker Jorge Alves used to say, “In the first years, we left too many raisins in the blend but learned this with further harvests.” Years of Savedra production so far are 2000, 2003, 2007, 2009, 2011, 2015, 2016, and 2017. Savedra directly faces Dirk Niepoort’s Quinta de Napoles on the eastern side of the Rio Tedo.

Quinta do Tedo Savedra 2017

Intense violet reflections in the almost black color. Fresh-floral bouquet, with elegant licorice, cassis, and tobacco. Abundant ripe tannins and very good supporting acidity. Fresh red-berry fruit, cherry, and chocolate. Long aftertaste, with a hint of astringency. | 93

Quinta do Tedo Savedra 2000

Transparent dark-red color. Fresh-fruity nose with noticeable acidity. Cherry, plum, and chocolate, a hint jammy, with some mineral notes. Complex and structured palate with chocolate and hints of plum. Very fine tannins. Long and fresh aftertaste. Already developed. | 91

Niepoort Pisca/Bioma

With the 2007 harvest, two more big names in the Port world joined the “Premium Vintage Port Club”: The Symingtons at their Quinta do Vesuvio, and Dirk Niepoort with his Pisca Vintage Port. Niepoort bought the vineyard Pisca in 2003, but its grapes have been part of their Vintage Ports for a very long time. With some 7.5ha (18.5 acres), Dirk Niepoort’s intention was to showcase the uniqueness of the vineyard by bottling Pisca/Bioma rather than positioning it as a Premium Vintage Port. He started in 2007 with Pisca, but due to legal constraints he renamed it Bioma in the years 2008, 2009, 2011, 2013, 2015, and 2016. In the fantastic 2017 vintage, Niepoort finally decided to bottle it as Bioma Vinha da Pisca, and to sell this at a Noval Nacional price level. The production varies between 2,000 and 5,000 bottles, and the Pisca vineyard is situated between the beautiful Quinta do Crasto and Quinta Nova on the north side of the Douro. Vinha da Pisca lies approximately 500ft (150m) higher than the Douro, but being south-facing and framed by the surrounding terraces,

temperatures in the vineyards are often higher than close to the river. “You can only make fantastic Ports, not still wines, there. Port vineyards like exaggerated conditions,” Niepoort states. Bioma Vinha da Pisca is also one of the few wines that uses the maximum legal aging for Vintage Ports in cask for up to three years before bottling.

Niepoort Bioma Vinha da Pisca 2017

Deep violet reflections in the intense, dark red color. Rustic, complex bouquet, with tobacco, licorice, and tar, balanced by red-berry fruit. Powerful, ripe tannic structure on the palate, with perfectly supporting acidity. Cassis, cherry, chocolate, and licorice. Long and multilayered aftertaste. Fantastic old-school Port. | 98

Niepoort Bioma 2011

Dark-red color. Intense but balanced, spicy bouquet: cherry, blackcurrant, tobacco. Tannic structure on the palate, chocolate, red-berry-fruit mix, with a spicy background. Long and complex aftertaste. Great aging potential. | 97

Niepoort Bioma 2008

Although 2008 was a rather cool year and produced somewhat one-dimensional Ports elsewhere, the 2008 Bioma Vintage Port shows a fantastic liveliness: Already somewhat transparent color at the rim, with little reflection. Seductive floral bouquet with some hints of cassis, vanilla, tobacco, and cherry. Perfectly integrated acidity on the palate, with cherry, chocolate, hints of cassis and white pepper. Long aftertaste, very nicely supported by the acidity. A hidden gem. | 94

Quinta do Vesuvio Capela de Vesuvio

In 2007, winemaker Charles Symington chose three top parcels within the Quinta do Vesuvio—Vinha da Capela, Vinha da Escola, and Vale da Teja—to produce a Premium Vintage Port. With an average of 3,500 bottles in the years 2007, 2011, 2016, and 2017, Capela de Vesuvio perfectly shows this concentration and freshness. The century-old field blend of Vinha da Capela, and longer skin contact in smaller *lagares* add concentration, while the freshness comes from the Vinha da Escolha, which lies much lower down, between the house and the railway.

Quinta do Vesuvio Capela de Vesuvio 2017

Deep, dark-red color, with medium-intense violet reflections. The nose reveals cherry, cassis, milk chocolate, and precise minerality. Perfectly supporting acidity and ripe tannins on the palate, nicely structured cassis, blackcurrant, green tea, and licorice. Long, fruit-driven aftertaste. | 97

Quinta do Vesuvio Capela de Vesuvio 2016

Deep, almost black, color. White pepper, a mix of red-berry fruit and tobacco on the nose. Slightly sharp but fresh palate, with cherry, chocolate, and fresh tobacco. Long aftertaste. | 94

Graham’s The Stone Terraces: Born in a great 21st-century year

“Two small 18th-century schist stone-terraced vineyards at Graham’s flagship Quinta dos Malvedos have constantly produced extraordinary Ports,” Henry Shotton stated when asked about the origins of The Stone Terraces Vintage Port. Port Arthur, a 1.2ha (3-acre) east-facing plot at around 360ft (110m) altitude, and Vinha dos Cardenhos, just 0.6ha (1.5 acres), facing west and perfectly surrounded by stone walls, are the two chosen plots, providing just 3,000 vines in total. Although planted in the old *vinhas velhas* style, Touriga Nacional is the predominant grape of the two vineyards. “None of these vineyards is facing south, which enables us to bottle a Port with not only a huge concentration but also some balancing freshness,” says Charles Symington.

Graham’s The Stone Terraces 2011

Almost black color, with a violet rim. Fresh and spicy bouquet, with chocolate, violets, tobacco, and white pepper; the red-berry fruit is currently reductive. Soft and structured palate, with great complexity, ripe tannins, and a perfectly integrated acidity. Chocolate, cherry, violets, plums, and tobacco. Long, fantastically structured, multilayered aftertaste. Only 3,000 bottles produced. | 98+

Graham’s The Stone Terraces 2017

The most recent release differs a bit from the classic line of the three predecessors. Bright violet reflections in the dark-red, almost black color. Mango and passion fruit on the nose, then behind this the classic cassis and dark-berry aromas and milk-chocolate. The palate transports the tropical fruit of the nose to the tongue; noticeable ripe tannic structure, tobacco and licorice. Long, complex, and fresh aftertaste. A bit funky, but on a very high level. | 96

Ferreira Vinhas Velhas: A bit under the radar

Just once so far, and with just 4,000 bottles, Ferreira launched the 2016 Vinhas Velhas Vintage Port in certain markets a little after the regular Ferreira Vintage Port. Also belonging to the Sogrape Group, Ferreira and Offley always have to bow before their bigger sibling Sandeman and are always a little

in its shadow, so that some countries did not have a proper introduction to the wine.

Ferreira’s top enologist Luis Sottomayor had been working on the Vinhas Velhas project for several years before he finally felt he had the requisite quality in 2016, with grapes originating mainly from Quintas do Porto and do Caêdo. *Vinhas velhas* means “old vines” but corresponds as much to the mixed plantations used in the Douro Valley for generations and still preserved by some producers today. To spice up the VV blend, Sottomayor selected an additional 5 percent Sousao for color and acidity, and 10 percent Touriga Nacional for fruit and freshness.

Ferreira Vinhas Velhas 2016

Intense, matt, dark-red color. Licorice, tobacco, cassis, violets, and milk chocolate on the very complex but balanced bouquet, which becomes more complex by the minute with air. Strong, juicy, and spicy red-berry fruit, milk chocolate, licorice, and firm tannins. Extremely long and multilayered finish. A terrific start into the world of Premium Vintage Ports. | 97

Croft’s Quinta da Roêda Sêrikos

The 2017 vintage generated the most recent member of the Premium Vintage Port family. At Croft’s Quinta da Roêda, the parcels Benedita, Ferradura, and Galeria contain the oldest vines (planted between 1889 and 1900) and always produced very intense Ports. Head winemaker David Guimaraens therefore selected the grapes for Sêrikos from these three sectors. The name reflects a dark period in the history of the quinta, since it was almost turned into a silk plantation, but luckily the vines prevailed. The new Premium Vintage Port is produced from the five classic Port grape varieties—Touriga Nacional, Touriga Francesa, Tinto Cao, Tinta Barroca, and Tinta Roriz—and Guimaraens says of it, “The first Sêrikos has all the typicity of Roêda, with its opulence, silky texture, and fine scented quality.”

Croft’s Quinta da Roêda Sêrikos 2017

Black-violet color with little reflections. Complex, slightly reductive bouquet, which does not yet show everything it will offer in the future: cherry, cassis, violets, and tobacco. Soft, multilayered palate, with fresh coffee, cassis, cherry, and a perfectly supporting acidity. Long, complex, multilayered aftertaste. Only 2,425 bottles. | 98